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**Emily Cuming and Helen Rogers**

**‘Revealing Fragments:**

**Close and Distant Reading of Working-Class Autobiography’**

*Family & Community History*

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On Saturday 7 June 1974, Mary Laura Triggles settled down to Radio 4’s ‘Woman’s Hour’ and heard the historian John Burnett asking for listeners to write to him about their memories of the ‘early history of the working class’. Over the next days, she began to pen her paternal ancestry, for ‘this is really a family story & that I am the only one left to tell it & (I shall be 86 years old in October.)’ Was this ‘the sort of material you were wanting?’ she asked tentatively, in a letter written 11<sup>th</sup> June, introducing herself to the professor. Before signing the letter, ‘Yours sincerely Mrs M L Triggles’, the writer explained ‘I have now told my story so if it is of no use, I feel better for telling it...’ Perhaps after re-reading her words, Mary added ‘PTO’ and turned over the page to add:

excuse mistakes & spelling. I have never tried to do any thing like this before, but I feel I have just been talking to someone & as I live alone even this has been like having company, almost as if the family were here with me.

MLT<sup>1</sup> [Figure 1]

We do not have the historian’s reply, but from Mary’s subsequent letters, it appears he encouraged her to write of her own life. ‘Thank you for your very kind letter’, she answered 3<sup>rd</sup> July in a letter accompanying five pages of reminiscences, composed over five days, about her childhood in the 1890s and young working life as a stocking mender in a Derbyshire factory in

the first decade of the twentieth century; ‘& I’ll try & write a bit more of my own experiences & my family.’<sup>2</sup>

Mary Triggler would continue corresponding with the historian, when health permitted, until she was aged ninety-three, for, as she would go on to note, ‘once I started I felt I had taken the lid off something that had been bottled up for too long & it had been good to talk about it.’<sup>3</sup> Her autobiographical letters are now housed in the Burnett Archive of Working Class Autobiographies in the Special Collections Library at Brunel University London. This archive contains several hundred first-person memoirs gathered by the historian while writing a series of anthologies on working-class reminiscences of work and recreation, childhood and schooling, and family life, beginning with *Useful Toil: Autobiographies of Working People from the 1820s to the 1920s* (1974). Many were deposited following Burnett’s appearances on ‘Woman’s Hour’, when May Owen from Plymouth, ‘heard on my little wireless that you still needed letters about “old times”’.<sup>4</sup>

The Burnett Archive continued to grow as Burnett compiled *The Autobiography of the Working Class: An Annotated Critical Bibliography* (Harvester, 3 vols., 1984-9), an index of c. two thousand texts by working people who lived in the period 1790-1945, with fellow historians David Vincent and David Mayall. It is the single largest collection in the UK of what we might call autobiographical life-writing from below and, in conjunction with the *Bibliography*, made possible ground-breaking studies of working-class lives and self-representation. Yet Burnett’s replies to the authors of the letters and memoirs, deposited in the archive, have not been catalogued and it is unclear how many have survived. We have to search the letters and memoirs themselves for clues to the two-way correspondence that often generated them. In some cases, the correspondence was a conversation—quite literally in Mary Triggler’s case—as she emphasized when writing, ‘it had been good to talk’.

This is just one of the ways in which we might view the Burnett Archive as *fragmentary* and the texts within it as *fragments*. Though extracts from many of the memoirs were included in Burnett's anthologies, few have been published in their own right. Some shift between diary and autobiography; others—like Mary Triggles—are as much the story of a parent or a family, as of the author's life. Many fill just a few pages or focus on a period within a life rather than offering a life-long account. And readers view them as PDFs of decades-old photocopies, disembodied from the original text—sometimes with pages missing or, like Mrs Triggles's letters, out of sequence—the grainy relics from a pre-digital age. But what does it mean to view a life narrative as *a fragment*? And how can we conceive the relationships between each single text in a *body* of writing as a whole, contained in a collection comprised of multiple fragments, and to the thousands of other working-class memoirs scattered across numerous archives throughout the British Isles?

These questions have come sharply into focus to us as we have been designing a collaborative research project on working-class autobiography that aims to build on Burnett's pioneering work by using digital methods of publication, archiving, and analysis. The historian's appeals to the listeners of 'Woman's Hour' to write down their recollections of working-class life, or to send him the memoirs of ancestors, stowed away among family papers in cupboards or attics, are an example of what is now fashionably called public engagement where scholars and archivists work alongside family and community historians in the research process. In this article we discuss plans to create an online portal to working-class autobiography that will not only facilitate access to this rich body of life-writing but also involve the public in understanding its significance for our collective past and present. First, however, we ask what is at stake when we position life-writing as *fragmentary*?

I. 'These pages are only fragments'

In an introductory letter that served as a preface to a collection of autobiographical writings by working women of the Women's Co-operative Guild, Virginia Woolf—with apparent reluctance—reflected on the value of these first-hand records of a domestic servant, a felt hat worker, and a number of labourers' wives.<sup>5</sup> The editor of the collection, and Woolf's friend, Margaret Llewelyn Davies, had initially been cautious about sharing these amateur autobiographical accounts, sent to her in the form of letters, fearing that 'they were very fragmentary and ungrammatical; they had been jotted down in the intervals of housework'.<sup>6</sup> While Woolf's introduction presents striking invocations of what she saw as the untapped potential of working women's writing, through which they might unleash their 'extraordinary vitality of the human spirit' and 'inborn energy', she famously expressed some pointed caveats.<sup>7</sup> Woolf ruminated at length on the status of these writings, admitting that even after the letters had been typed up and docketed, she considered them to be important accounts that revealed hardship and the crucial lived experience of working women, but remained ambivalent as to whether they constituted 'literature'. She returned to the issue of the partial nature of these accounts in her concluding paragraph: "These pages are only fragments. These voices are beginning only now to emerge from silence into half articulate speech. These lives are still half hidden in profound obscurity".<sup>8</sup> The notion of the 'fragment', in this context, is used to characterise writing that is considered to be incomplete, emergent and not yet accomplished; for Woolf, its fragmentary nature is what distinguishes it from literary writing (although in a later letter to Davies she apologised for '[making] too much of the literary side of my interest').<sup>9</sup> We wonder whether Woolf might have had more to say about the nature of these 'interrupted' autobiographical writings of working women, as a writer who herself saw the episodic diary form as a way of capturing what she called 'this loose, drifting material of life',<sup>10</sup> and an autobiographer who produced 'unstable or provisional writing, sketches rather than formal memoirs, letters and a diary'.<sup>11</sup> Indeed the contrast in symbolic value accorded to different kinds of 'fragmentary' forms has often extended to critical readings of the autobiographical genre. The fragmentation of

the remembering subject in middle-class life-writing is taken to be a question of art and experimentation, whereas the partial modes of the working person's autobiography are more commonly interpreted narrowly in relation to the writer's material circumstances.<sup>12</sup> As Julia Swindells surmises in the context of Woolf's preface to *Life As We Have Known It*, here 'art is of the middle classes, "life" is of the workers.'<sup>13</sup>

To what extent then is it helpful or indeed accurate to describe the Burnett Archive as a collection of fragmentary lives? Do we need to turn away from the category of the 'fragmentary' that has perhaps limited the reception and achievement of working-class autobiography *as writing*, or is it a term to which we can add more nuance and context? As noted above, the Burnett collection is distinctive for being predominantly composed of unpublished material, some of it belonging to that unfathomably rich cache of what Burnett called 'treasured family papers, much of it possibly unregarded attic lumber,'<sup>14</sup> while a significant portion was written as a response to the 'Woman's Hour' programmes. The generic looseness of the works collected by Burnett was refreshingly broad and pioneering, given the widely-accepted understanding today of life-writing as a diverse and hybrid field that includes memoirs, biographies, letters and diaries. Many of the writings in the Burnett Archive do not fit the mould of the 'conventional' autobiography *per se* (including the model of the nineteenth- and twentieth-century published working-class autobiography), a form thought to be marked by the presentation of the linear development of the autobiographical subject and a narrative of vocational, social or political progress.<sup>15</sup>

The Burnett texts are on the whole amateur accounts, most unpublished and largely unedited—as far as it is possible to tell—beyond a number of visible corrections in both the handwritten manuscripts and typescripts, many of which appear to have been inserted by the autobiographers, although it is of course possible that a family member or friend sometimes provided these amendments. While a number of the autobiographies are of book-length form (several contain 80,000-100,000 words), other contributions to the collection are slim enough to

be described as fragments. Reg Farndon's autobiographical recollections of Worthing at the turn of the century, for example, comprises a list of paragraphs describing an assortment of memories and makes up one page of typescript.<sup>16</sup> Ethel Mary Ellen Ley's account of her life in care a 'Home for Friendless Girls' in Plymouth, as dictated to her granddaughter, reaches a mere 700 words—the account of her life, as she was able, or chose, to represent it, fills no more than five pages.<sup>17</sup> In fact some of the titles of the autobiographies make reference to what the authors perceive to be the amateur quality of their accounts, or their brevity, such as the subheading to Eleanor Hutchinson's autobiography, 'The Bells of St Mary's: A Collection of Essays done at times, together with many fragments, as incidents occurred to me', or Lucy Luck's suitably alliterative title 'A Little of My Life'.<sup>18</sup> Winifred Till asked Burnett in one of her letters 'to overlook the shortcomings of these little jottings', while Edward Baker concluded his East End 'nature diary' with the statement: 'Here ends for the year 1895 this diary. It will be seen that it is often incomplete, often vague and with no connecting ideas running through it.'<sup>19</sup> But the slightness of some of the accounts, and their inclusion in this archive, is significant in itself. For after his summation of the 'incomplete' diary, Edward added, 'Still it has been a pleasure to write even this and no doubt better will be done in the future.'<sup>20</sup> And the fact that Ethel Ley dictated her five-page account to her granddaughter and sought for it to be included in the collection is important, not least in that it has ramifications for how we might interpret working-class people's own sense of the value of their accounts, allowing us to think beyond the generic framing devices and statements of modesty that were a standard feature of many published nineteenth-century working-class autobiographies.

If some of the autobiographies are fragmentary by virtue of their brevity, others appear to be literally incomplete. Because these are unpublished accounts, it is not always possible to assess if the abrupt end of an autobiography is deliberate, or if a section of the manuscript is missing. It is also important to note that a majority of the Burnett autobiographers were writing in older age; in some instances, deteriorating handwriting, and their own pronouncements on the

increasing effort that the writing demanded, renders explicit the broader theoretical insight that life-writing is intimately connected to the body and the passing of time. For many, like Minnie Frisby born in 1877, recollecting the past was both a distraction from pain and an exercise in catharsis. As Minnie acknowledged in the opening line to her two volume 'Memories', when she was aged 65, 'I have been bedridden now nearly 5 years and although crippled with Arthritis and limbs and arms practically useless, my mind is very active'.<sup>21</sup>

But the fragmentary nature of this archive of autobiographical writing can also be interpreted in terms of the writing itself and the ways—or *forms*—through which these authors' memories are articulated. To engage with this aspect of the collection, and to take seriously these autobiographical accounts as forms of writing rather than just historical 'evidence', can enable us to think further about the partial nature of all life-writing and the necessarily fragmented and unfinished ways in which autobiographers give an account of themselves. The fragmentary, interrupted aspect of a number of the Burnett holdings can then be seen less as a defect, a limitation, or a problem, and instead as a suggestive and resonant aspect of working-class life-writing. In this respect, it is worth noting that many of the writers self-reflexively meditate on the fragmentary nature of autobiographical recall and the workings of memory and the partial ways in which their recollections of the past are webbed together to form the account of a 'life'. A number of authors, for example, ruminate on their choice to render the past through the display of a number of disconnected memories and flashes of recall. In these instances, they relate vivid episodes, images and memories from childhood in passages marked by sharp visual and sensory detail. Some of these episodes might be aptly described as 'moments of being', a phrase coined by Woolf in her autobiographical 'A Sketch of the Past', and deemed characteristic of modernist autobiographical writing.<sup>22</sup> From this perspective, telling a life through formative moments of concentrated reality, leading to what can be an episodic and non-chronological narrative, need not be seen as an exclusively 'literary' or modernist form. Indeed it may require a re-reading of



how the fragment, as a device, might emerge as a compelling feature of working-class autobiography.

Several examples from the Burnett autobiographies can illustrate this point. One author, Alice Maud Chase, was born in 1880 in Portsmouth and died in 1968, having written her memoirs for her grandchildren in later life between 1960-1. Her father was a local builder and timber merchant and she lived in a home with four step-brothers and sisters. Some of the inevitable limitations of the formidable index entries compiled by Burnett, Mayall and Vincent are highlighted with respect to Alice Maud Chase's writings. The index suggests that 'The Memoirs of Alice Maud Chase' are 'more of a family history than an autobiography,' and that the 'narrative comprises brief annual sketches of events [and] some reference to personal experiences of home, work and courtship'.<sup>23</sup> The index here is concerned less with form than ostensible content, and this short summation cannot fully capture the richness of Alice's writing. Her 'brief sketches of events' are in fact marked by expressive qualities, including an engaging storytelling voice, features of oral narration and attempts to capture the fragmentary workings of memory. In a manner that is repeated among several other Burnett autobiographies, Alice is insistent about her power to recall instances that occurred at a very young age: 'Now people tell me that no one could possibly remember being sixteen months old, but I do, and I know I do'.<sup>24</sup> She goes on to narrate a sequence of memories relating to her quarantine at her grandmother's house, in Nelson's Square, Portsmouth, after the older siblings in her family contracted diphtheria:

I can remember the journey, about 20 minutes' walk, the clothes I wore, a fawn cloth pelisse and bonnet of the same cloth, with a pleated frill of pale blue silk inside round my face. I can remember the noise that old wooden-wheeled contraption made, rattling over the rough stoned pavement, like a porter's barrow in a railway station, enough to wake the seven sleepers. Also I remember my granny (Gamblin) taking me down the garden to

a little rustic bench where she sat and held me on her lap. I can remember the white rose tree, the grape-vine, and going to be with Lilly on a mattress spread on the floor and waking up in the night and crying for my mother. I can remember being given a doll to comfort me and seeing a furry caterpillar from the garden on the doll's dress.

There my memories come to an end. I do not remember how long we were there, or going home, or any more about it.<sup>25</sup>

The tortoiseshell caterpillar and the white rose tree are evocative images that she appears to have retained throughout her life. As Alice herself makes clear, they signify her sense of separation from her mother, an event which 'made such a deep impression on my baby mind that I recall it all to this day'.<sup>26</sup> Something similar can be found in Wilhelmina Tobias's account of her childhood growing up in Newcastle as the daughter of a shipworker. Wilhelmina claims to remember being as young as 2½, and she expresses these memories through a series of vivid images. In one, she gazes down from the bedroom window at a 'colossal object' which seemed to be 'growing out of the bottom of the street' (in fact the Mauretania ocean liner).<sup>27</sup> In another passage written in the stylised present tense form, Wilhelmina evokes the senses of touch, smell and hearing as she describes the domestic interior through a baby's-eye-view: 'Now I am lying in a cot at the side of the fire in our living room, my baby hand being held through the bars in the hand of this beautifully scented being who was my mother. She was crooning a mournful ditty.'<sup>28</sup>

A later chapter in Alice Maud Chase's Portsmouth memoir is entirely composed of an assortment of memories, a litany of scraps of memory that did not make their way into the main body of the narrative, or, as she puts it, just 'a few things I have not mentioned in this book'.<sup>29</sup> Some of these add historical details she thinks will be of interest to the reader—the arrival of the railway in Gosford before it was built in Portsmouth, watching the royal opening of the new Portsmouth Town Hall. Alice also includes images that apparently had a lasting effect—a mad dog caught and killed on the doorstep opposite to her house, and bare-footed children begging

for scraps of food from the ‘dockies’ at the dockyard gates.<sup>30</sup> This is followed by a section simply entitled: ‘Things I have done.’ Again, the list form supplants linear narrative as a way of enumerating and documenting the fragments added to her account of a life. ‘Well, for one thing’, she begins, ‘I have made a patchwork quilt, with 2,109 one-inch squares in it. All by hand, padding and lining and all.’<sup>31</sup> She lists the mountains she has climbed, and the number of times she has climbed them, as well as the number of dresses she has made for six pantomimes. These fragments are diligently recalled and enumerated, and they make clear Alice’s deep valuation of the care and attention that she took over these tasks.

This documentation of the quotidian, of ‘ordinary’ acts, is important because it emphasises, as Alice puts it, that ‘I have done things’ and that ‘while I cannot do much now, while I could do things, I did them’. This takes on greater resonance in relation to the physical effects of aging and its relationship to the process of remembering and writing: ‘I have to sit still a lot now, because I have not the strength to keep on doing things; but there is quite a lot of pleasure to be got by sitting still and just remembering.’<sup>32</sup> The apparent pleasure she takes in assembling these pieces of her autobiography, akin to the process of stitching the patchwork quilt, is also in evidence throughout this memoir (as it is in many of the others in the collection).<sup>33</sup> As Jennifer Sinor explains in her moving study of ‘ordinary’ autobiographical writing through the interpretation of her great-great-great-aunt Annie Ray’s diary written in nineteenth-century Dakota, it is equally important to recognise the ordinariness of memory fragments as it is to centre attention on memories as ‘epiphanic moments’ or narrative turning points in the writer’s life story.<sup>34</sup> This kind of ‘ordinary’ writing can place demands on the reader to read autobiography in new and potentially creative ways. As Sinor notes:

more important than being able to identify or define ordinary writing is all that we gain when we learn to read it. Developing tools to read ordinary writing allows us to see that

ordinary writing, while measured and open and fragmented and boring, presents just as complicated an intersection of writer, text, and context as any form of writing.<sup>35</sup>

Another Burnett autobiographer, Lilian Wilson, who was born in 1896 in Ilfracombe, North Devon, also reflects on the process of memory and its production or dependence on partial forms. She begins her ‘book of memories,’ like a number of the Burnett authors, by commenting on the process of autobiographical recall:

I have no real knowledge of how to write but I have done my best, also I have only put into this account what I have seen to be true or believe to be true. [...] My mind is full of what I have seen or heard during many years, but it is like a Jig-saw puzzle but with no finished picture to compare it with, being all little bits and pieces muddled up in my head. One cannot see the finished picture, because so much history has been swept away, by changing customs during the years.<sup>36</sup>

The analogy of the jigsaw puzzle is suggestive; as with the notion of the fragment, it evokes the idea that memories belong to something that was previously whole and has since fallen apart (and can therefore perhaps be re-collected). A. James Gordon, who writes an ‘Intimate Autobiography’ detailing his life-long involvement with the Methodist Church, likewise uses the analogy of the jigsaw puzzle in his life story and meditates on the extent to which the fragments might result in something more complete: ‘As I have recorded recollections of the past and as I reflect upon the happenings of the present, I ~~want~~ wish above all else to know whether the events and circumstances of the life of an ordinary individual have any significant meaning. Do they add up? Are they a haphazard conjunction of this and that, or pieces of a jig-saw which are meant to be fitted together to form a complete picture?’<sup>37</sup> Both Lilian Wilson and A. James Gordon are posing key questions about the ability of autobiography to retrieve the past, or to recreate a fuller familial or historical picture, and both writers are immersed in the practice of *using* the fragments both to articulate and reflect upon life-writing, and life *as* writing. Alongside

the patchwork quilt and jigsaw puzzle, Eleanor Hutchinson offers another image by which the Burnett autobiographers conceptualise autobiographical recall. She thinks back to the people who inhabited her past and who can be revisited through processes of memory in a moving, suggestive and nicely ‘ordinary’ image: ‘Figures appear and disappear, like electric bulbs on a Christmas tree lighting up and going out. One can never quite recapture them’.<sup>38</sup>

Another way of thinking about fragmentary lives in relation to the Burnett Archive is to consider the materiality of the collection itself and the way in which its form as an archive of several hundred autobiographies shapes how we view and read the lives it contains. Viewed in this way, it is possible to consider how each autobiography is a fragment of a whole, creating a composite and necessarily incomplete ‘jigsaw’ of the lived experience of working people throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. At the same time, reading the memoirs separately and closely, means that we do not lose sight of the forms of the individual autobiographies contained within the collection—from the one-page account, to the multi-volume memoir—for these have much to tell us about the distinctive shapes, and their possibilities and limitations, that frame the way in which lives can be written. This attention to the specificity of the texts is particularly important in light of the fact that working-class autobiographical texts are commonly reproduced as shortened extracts in anthological collections (as has been the case with a number of memoirs from the Burnett Archive). Passages from these autobiographies may be used to exemplify stock themes such as ‘Childhood’, ‘Work’, or ‘Community’. To conceive of these texts as an archival whole therefore offers a number of possibilities for the historian and literary critic, including the ability to read texts by individuals who were unknown to each other in an affiliative way, tracing common experiences as well as patterns of imagery and stylistic devices, noting and accounting for their marked difference and contrasts, and placing accounts side-by-side so that they might create a collective jigsaw of individual lives whose richness lies both in their uniqueness and their relationality.

## II. Writing Lives Together

This critical approach to affiliation and relationality is at the heart of the Writing Lives project and we now report on two ways in which we are endeavouring to interweave readings of the autobiographies both at the micro level of individual texts and the macro level of the archive. On the third year Writing Lives module at Liverpool John Moores University, students ‘adopt’ a writer from the Burnett Collection and publish an ‘Author Blog’ on the module’s website [www.writinglives.org](http://www.writinglives.org). Each author blog introduces the memoir and contextualises the writer’s life in ten posts exploring themes such as home and family, childhood and education, life and labour. As we have noted, the PDF copies of the memoirs present challenges for contemporary readers, and students are often daunted by the unfamiliar handwriting of writers schooled in a different style to their own. In making these works attractive as well as accessible to a public audience, students are encouraged to ‘bring to life’ the author and the memoir by writing in an engaging style and illustrating their posts with visual material that helps readers to picture the world the author inhabited. Above all, they are asked to foreground the author’s voice to show how they expressed themselves and how their personality was conveyed through narrative content and style. Following an introductory post, for instance, students carefully tease out of the memoir their autobiographer’s ‘Purpose and Audience’, by showing what motivated the writer and what kinds of readers they hoped to address.

While students take individual responsibility for researching and crafting their Author Blogs, they also support each other collaboratively by giving feedback on fellow students’ posts and sharing their collective work via social media. They are encouraged to draw comparisons between their author’s experience and expression and those of other lives explored on the website and, thereby, to make the affiliative connections we note above. Readers, too, can trace the shared and diverse experiences and responses of our authors by reading posts related to a particular theme. Alternatively, by reading an Author Blog in its entirety, they can pull together

the many threads within an individual life and a single piece of life-writing. Working together, the Writing Lives students have now published over 150 Author Blogs and their collaborative research has had over 100,000 views in the last two years, with many repeat visits and considerable praise. They have inspired numerous audiences by speaking eloquently about their passionate commitment to the lives they research, as two postgraduate students reported recently:

In what amounts to an astonishing act of scholarly generosity, 'Writing Lives' makes available a vast corpus of information on working-class life writing, including transcripts of hard-to-access memoirs and associated details about their authors. PGRs and ECRs, faced with the pressure to compete in the solitary process of job applications, have a model of scholarly collaboration in 'Writing Lives'. This act of democratisation, one suspects, is one which many of the authors of the autobiographies would have supported.<sup>39</sup>

This innovative approach to public history has also revealed significant avenues for further research and contributed to the wider research design and questions of the Writing Lives project. New themes have emerged out of students' collective research and since the project launched we have added themed posts on war and memory, migration, fun and festivities, and illness and disability, which as the memoirs reveal affected the lives of numerous authors and their close relatives. '[M]y mother altho she lived to be 84 could not walk for 40 years', wrote Mary Triggle; 'she had that painful & crippling Rheu mat toro thritus, (may not be spelt right)'.<sup>40</sup> The memoirs frequently demonstrate the agency of disabled people and their families in striving to lead as full a life as possible. Hearing of a new design for prams, Mary's family asked a factory to make a four-wheel wicker folding chair, so 'Mother got the first folding invalid chair made in Nottingham' of which the factory subsequently made many.<sup>41</sup> Through research by students like

Jess Baker, author of the blog on Mary Triggles, we have been able to add to and refine questions we seek to ask in large-scale data analysis of working-class autobiography.<sup>42</sup>

In addition to collecting working-class autobiographies, in the 1980s John Burnett set out with fellow historians David Vincent and David Mayall to locate and index surviving memoirs by working people, born in Britain between 1790 and 1945. They identified c. 2,000 texts, mostly housed in local archives, and wrote a biographical entry on each writer with a short overview of their memoir, published in three volumes as *The Autobiography of the British Working Class: An Annotated Critical Bibliography*. These entries are mini biographies in their own right and together they present an elaborate portrait and collective study—or prosopography—of multiple lives. Though the entries vary in size, according to the length and complexity of the memoir and the historical value the editors attributed it, their systematic format lends the data to large-scale comparative analysis. The entry on Mary Laura Triggles, for example, is relatively slight but shows how each was ordered by (1) bibliographical data and archival location; (2) a résumé of the author's birth, parentage and education, and an outline of their adult life, geographical movements, and marital status; (3) their main occupations; (4) their interests and social activities; (5) and finally a brief overview of the memoir's content, tone, and its historical significance.

1:719 TRIGGLE, Mary Laura, Series of autobiographical letters, MS, pp.25 (c.4,000 words). Brunel University Library.

Born 1888 at Heanor, Derbys. Father: coal miner. Mother: cleaner and general caretaker at chapel. One of 6 children. Educated at National Church School (1891-1900); Sunday School. Taught domestic duties by mother (aged 13). Married, 1911, with 2 children.

Lived in Heanor, Derbys. Letters written from Longnor, Shropshire.

Stocking-mender (1901-11).

Choir member; one of the first members of the Hosiery Workers' Union.



A short collection of reminiscences, though with good detail on ancestry and family history and of her time as a stocking-mender in the opening years of the 20th century. Written between 1974 and 1977.<sup>43</sup>

In a pilot study by John Herson and Helen Rogers, we have converted the entries on a sample of 220 memoirs in the Burnett Archive into a structured database, incorporating 60 fields that allow for queries generated by our students' research, such as disability, unemployment, or experiences of residential care. This complex data allows us to compare authors' experiences by birth, and sometimes death, by occupation and their parents' occupations, by education, places of residence, marital status, political affiliation, recreations, and so on. Defining class, of course, is notoriously controversial but we adopt Burnett et al's capacious and pragmatic classification of the autobiographies as 'retrospective first-person narratives by those who spent part of their lives in the "working class", defined by occupation, cultural ties and associations, and self-ascription'.<sup>44</sup> Despite the systematic format of the biographical entries, however, the editors emphatically rejected taking a quantitative approach to their analysis. As 'literary works', wrote David Vincent, autobiographies 'are not a statistically accurate sample of the working class and no truths, either general or in particular, can be deduced by adding up their contents and dividing by the total number'.<sup>45</sup>

We agree that quantitative approaches to the authors and their writings cannot reveal the complexity of individual lives and are no substitute for close reading and textual analysis. We propose, however, that distant reading methods allow us to identify patterns and trends in authorship and cultural expression that are frequently missed or only intuited when reading collections of individual texts. Given the articulacy and often confidence required to write a personal memoir, for instance, it has generally been assumed that working-class autobiographers were among the more literate—and consequently the more upwardly mobile—of their class.<sup>46</sup> Comparing the occupational status of the Burnett authors with that of their fathers, we can trace

improvements in the occupational fortunes of two-thirds of the Burnett authors born to unskilled fathers. Yet among those born to fathers in semi-skilled or skilled trades, it is remarkable that more remained within the same vocational bracket, or moved to lower status forms of work, than rose above their social position.

Our preliminary findings, based on this relatively small sample of 220 memoirs, raise tantalising questions about changes in the social composition of autobiographers and their cultural interests if we extend the timeframe of our study. Here, however, we focus on our highly suggestive results on the gendered nature of autobiography. Only one in ten of the two-thousand autobiographers listed in the Bibliography were women, estimated its editors.<sup>47</sup> Of the eighteen memoirs in our sample written by authors born before 1870, all were by men. Martha Martin, author of ‘The Ups and Downs of Life’, is the earliest born female of these autobiographers, born in 1871 to a market gardener in Tamworth. She went into domestic service, aged fifteen, and later worked as a hotel chambermaid and waitress before emigrating to the USA in 1914. The editors could be scathing of memoirs they considered lacking in historical interest. ‘A lengthy and rather laboured piece, with much personal, incidental detail’, they wrote of Martha’s memoir; ‘No comments are made on domestic affairs, work arrangements and conditions, or social and political matters. Of little historical value’.<sup>48</sup>

Whatever the readability or historical interest of ‘The Ups and Downs of Life’, Martha’s memoir is significant in preluding a dramatic surge in women’s autobiographical writing. Eighty-nine of our sample were born between 1870 and 1899. Of these, forty-one (46%)—almost half—were women. In girlhood, they were among the first generations of children to go through the national system of elementary education, launched in 1870. The steady increase in female autobiographers born in each of these decades coincides with the gradual extension of compulsory schooling. Four women were born in the 1870s, and nine in the following decade, after attendance became compulsory between the ages of 5 and 10 in 1880. Twenty-eight women

were born in the final decade of the century, when the age of schooling was raised to 11 in 1891 and to 12 in 1899, and when parents were routinely prosecuted for keeping children out of school. By 1900, female literacy rates had caught up with those of males.<sup>49</sup> It is striking, therefore, that of ninety of our authors born between 1900 and 1930, fifty-five (66%) were women.

We might expect, of course, a preponderance of female authors in a collection advertised on 'Woman's Hour'. Although some memoirs by men were deposited with the Burnett as a result of the programme, it is telling that of the nine writers who sent the historian their reminiscences by way of letters, only one correspondent was a man. The historian was lucky to receive his testimony, quipped Mr H.J. Harris. '[Y]ou were indeed fortunate, to have ME as a listener, on that particular day for Woman's Hour is not my top programme by any means. Besides this, it happens to come after that most boring of programmes "The Archers" which, if anything would induce me to commit suicide.'<sup>50</sup> Of such serendipities are archives made! Although Radio 4's programme undoubtedly helped Burnett identify considerable numbers of female-authored texts, our data analysis across the decades indicates a clear trend and a pronounced gender transformation in both autobiographical authorship and the preservation of women's life-writing. Once we are able to index and map memoirs written since the 1980s, it will be interesting to see if this preponderance of female authors continues to hold, and for printed works as well as the unpublished manuscripts found in the Burnett Archive.

That said, our data suggests other kinds of evidence of women's timidity in setting pen to paper. If the absence of a title can be taken as a potential indicator of authorial reticence, it may be telling that of the sixty untitled memoirs in our sample, two-thirds were written by women. Judged by the confident tone of some of the Burnett authors, this was certainly not the case in all of these untitled memoirs, while conversely, some highly proficient writers could prove diffident autobiographers. Born in 1899, the office worker Kay Garrett used to scribble away during her

lunch hour. A wartime poster “It All Depends on You!” provoked her passionate response—“It All Depends on Me!”—‘about what we all had to do to ensure that the misery of 1919 and after, didn’t happen all over again’.<sup>51</sup> After being prompted by a fellow office-girl to send her piece to the *Daily Mirror*, Kay was offered a position by the features editor and became a full-time columnist for seventeen years, writing under the pseudonym ‘Mary Brown’. Despite her journalistic fame and colourful life, she signed off her autobiographical letter somewhat indifferently: ‘I have omitted all the personal bits from this narrative because I imagine they are not what is wanted. If you want any extra filling-in, please tell me, though I imagine this is more than enough.’<sup>52</sup>

We know that at least thirty-eight of our sample authors undertook writing activities beside their memoir because they referred to their literary efforts or included examples of their own verse or newspaper articles in their reminiscences. Women made up just over a quarter of these practiced writers, though we expect library and newspaper searches will reveal others of both sexes. At least six authors kept a diary for part of their lives, while five wrote occasional columns or items for newspapers or trade magazines. The miner, Harold Heslop and author of the aptly named ‘From Tyne to Tone: A Journey’, is now acknowledged as a significant proletarian novelist of the 1930s.<sup>53</sup> Nevertheless, his memoir remains unpublished. Born in 1880 the son of a brewer, Edward Brown wrote an unpublished novel on the ‘Suffragette movement’ as well as poetry and numerous essays, and went on to lecture on business after a series of clerical posts, yet did not title his memoir.<sup>54</sup> At least fourteen wrote poetry, often including verses in their memoirs. Kathleen Hilton-Foord, born 1903 to a taxidermist, was raised mainly by her grandmother, to whom she dedicated one of her two memoirs, written in poetry and prose, that she also illustrated by hand: ‘Grannie’s Girl’ and ‘The Survivor: The Memoirs of a Little Dover girl’.<sup>55</sup>

Like Kathleen, who lived till the age of ninety-five, a third of our sample authors wrote exclusively on their childhood years, while a further 17% (35) limited their reminiscences to childhood and young adulthood. Just under a half (48%) recollected their whole life up to the point of writing. This is another way in which we might see many of these memoirs as fragments of lives. Female authors again predominate in these partial memoirs, forming three quarters of those who wrote only of their childhood. Analysing the corpus as a whole by life-coverage raises numerous questions about the determination of autobiographical content. Do those writing for family readers, for instance, choose to focus on their formative years because this was the period unknown to their children and descendants? Are elderly writers themselves drawn back to their early memories that often sharpen in focus in late life? And how might the concentration on early years in these memoirs affect how we interpret the absence of discussion of married, domestic life in the published autobiographies of many men who rose to prominence, yet who dwelt in detail on their home and family in childhood? Perhaps more is at work in these autobiographical selections than patriarchal silence on private life?

The significance of life-coverage has, to our knowledge, gone largely unnoticed in autobiographical studies and it would not have occurred to us to track it without the prosopographical work undertaken by the Writing Lives students. But perhaps most revealing of their collective endeavour, has been in showing the emotional significance of life-writing to the authors themselves, and to readers—whether descendants or strangers. In a final post—‘Researching Writing Lives’—students reflect on what they have learned through their individual and collaborative research. Frequently they comment on the ethical responsibility they felt in curating someone’s life and their empathic connection with the writer that drove their commitment. As English student Ruth Childerhouse wrote of her research on Mrs [Ruth] Downer:

Working with a factual source, rather than fiction, was exciting. It gave the work a sense of importance because I was researching a real account and a real life, giving a peripheral figure a voice. We were challenged to make the forgotten and personal into something central and public. However, this also had its challenges. Throughout the project I was aware of the dangers of misrepresenting RM Downer's life and thoughts, and did not want my research to misinterpret or overshadow her words.<sup>56</sup>

The connection students make with their author is often felt most profoundly and viscerally when they transcribe parts of the memoir and—in some cases—the memoir as a whole. Slowing the reading process down can make the reader notice what is easily skimmed over. Writing at a similar speed to the original author makes you much more aware of their voice and the effort involved in conveying what they wanted to say. Far more than an exercise in note-taking, transcription becomes integral to interpretation and understanding, as Helen Rogers discovered by transcribing Mary Laura Trigg's letters to John Burnett. In the final part of this article we now explore the importance this autobiographical correspondence held for Mary.

III. 'PS please forgive an old woman just having a little talk with you'

Like many autobiographers who plotted their family history, Mary Trigg began with a five page 'story' about her paternal ancestry rather than her own life. Her grandfather—a drinker and gambler, 'the black sheep' in 'what we would think a middle class family'—ran away to Heanor in Derbyshire and became a framework stockinger.<sup>57</sup> Born into a destitute home, Mary's father seemed to be following the same path to ruin but, after setting out with his mates and a barrow of rotten oranges to throw at the Primitive Methodist minister, instead was miraculously 'converted in the really & truly old fashioned way & no disturbance took place'.<sup>58</sup> Mary's father became a coalminer and married one of the girls from chapel. Together they worked as caretakers at the chapel and put their small wage towards their children's Sunday boots, while apparently reforming the drunken grandfather who 'altered all his ways'.<sup>59</sup> For Mary, the story of

her father's conversion was no mere anecdote but a transformative event in the life-course of her family that defined its history: 'But I do think how different life could have been if Father had not gone to throw rotten fruit at the preacher (But it really was a pebble in a pond & the ripples are still going. (But God threw it for him)).'<sup>60</sup>

Burnett seems to have encouraged Mary to write about her childhood and early adult life for, in her next letter, she promised, 'I'll try & write a bit more of my own experiences & my family', and enclosed a seven page account, beginning with attending the National Church School at 3½ years old.<sup>61</sup> The girls were kept home for a year to learn domestic skills before going into the hosiery factory—'we all made good wives when we married'—and she recollected her pride in starting at I&R Morley's as a stocking-mender and joining the choir, where they learned Handel's *Messiah* by heart: 'I also can look back & I think to me, at that time was the high light of my youth, the day I went to work at 13'.<sup>62</sup>

Before posting this second account, Mary remembered an additional detail she recounted with a self-deprecating joke:

PS I forgot to mention that we girls at I & R Morley in Heanor were among the first to join a Hosiery union at 3 pence per week, excuse both bad writing & spelling ^old money^ mistakes I used to be good, but not any more, so shall have to go to school again.<sup>63</sup>

In response, it appears that Burnett pressed Mary for more recollections about this union activity. Her reply, we can imagine, may have disappointed the social historian for it did not deliver an unqualified defence of workers' collective organisation:

We could not down tools & just walk out, there was nowhere else to go & we had to eat, I am glad things are different, but at the same time I wonder if some of life's things come too easy & I am glad we started a union, but feel it has got out of hand these days &

there is little [respect?] & where has the please & thankyou gone [indecipherable] even in small children.<sup>64</sup>

Carolyn Steedman has noted that the life-narratives of the poor and the marginalised come to us, so often, via the interest of an interlocutor such as a journalist, invariably middle-class, who gives them the opportunity to tell their story and yet leaves out the questions that prompted these apparently first-person accounts. The fragmentary and partial nature of their testimonies are smoothed over in the published accounts, along with the gaps of what remained unsaid or did not resonate with what the investigator wanted to hear.<sup>65</sup> In 1974, when Burnett and Mary corresponded, the history of the trade union movement and allied collective struggles were a central focus of social and labour history. Though Burnett pushed beyond this traditional framework with his pioneering research on childhood and recreation, he did not enquire about aspects of Mary's life that perhaps held more significance to her. Apparently he did not ask about the last three decades, since she had been widowed, though in her previous letter she had mentioned the deaths of her son, aged thirty-three, in a road accident in 1946 and of her husband, a hosiery machine builder, two years later; 'he never got over the death of our son'.<sup>66</sup> Widowhood, old age, and loneliness were now a large part of Mary's existence, the pain of which is only hinted at in her letters: '(Still life has often been lonely)'. Memory had become a source of diversion and consolation: 'I am very thankfull for all the happy memories; I have & my granddaughter at ^agge years^ 25 loves to get me talking of old times'.<sup>67</sup>

Our point here is not to criticize Burnett. Each generation has different questions to ask about the past. The memoirs he collected contain within them, however, invaluable first-person testimony about the experience of old age that is only now emerging as a subject of historical enquiry.<sup>68</sup> Mary, for instance, broke off her correspondence. 'I had to stop writing as I was not well & felt the weight of my years', she explained when she resumed in 1977. Just as importantly, the Burnett memoirs provide evidence of how memory works. 'I am in my 89<sup>th</sup> year & still live



alone', Mary—now housebound—told Burnett; 'But sitting alone I still have many memories.' Since the previous summer, when family friends had visited, her memories seem to have played off their conversation, for 'something they said made me think of quite a lot of the past':

They said, How cosy & comfortable your house is & how good the furniture looks, & I said yes, but it is the first we bought in 1910 when we were thinking of getting married & it has been in constant use ever since.<sup>69</sup>

So many of Mary's memories, as for other autobiographers, were anchored in the solid objects and familiar ornaments that surrounded them, the comforting daily reminders of the past, kept alive in the present. She was delighted, therefore, to receive 'a very nice letter' from Burnett and to hear of his family connections with the Nottingham firm that had made her furniture: 'It made me take another look at my home & especially the dining table, it is very square & made of solid polished oak & the grain is lovely'. Looking at it 'made me remember the day we went round the factory' and were shown the 'new line' in extending tables. One memory led to many more: '(it has had lots of real parties with 12 people seated round it)?<sup>70</sup>

Mary's furnishings were material objects, imbued with personal memory that kept her mind alive. But conversations were the means of sharing and re-igniting memory. Her correspondence with Burnett, often incorporating remembered dialogue, was a way of both extending conversations—repeating her friends' astonishment that the newly weds had paid for their furniture with 'golden sovereigns'—and of beginning new ones. She wrote her chatty letters as she spoke, conveying the rhythms and colloquialisms of her speech. They comprise not only autobiographical fragments, therefore, but also fragments of her voice and remembered conversations. As Burnett and his co-editors noted in their introduction to *The Autobiography of the Working Class*, many autobiographers wrote 'as they spoke':

Each generation always informed and entertained the next by means of spoken reminiscence, and in one sense the contents of the bibliography must be seen as the surviving outcrops of the once pervasive oral history of the common people.<sup>71</sup>

Mary Triggles's letters from the 1970s shows that tradition lasted well into the late twentieth century and, perhaps continues today, even as first-person reminiscence moves into digital and interactive forms of communication.

The Writing Lives website, we hope, will offer a means for people like Mary to share their reminiscences and to take part in conversations about their past and present. The website will be extended so that individuals can upload their own life-writing and interact with other authors and readers. It is striking that while many of the Burnett authors were familiar with the conventions of autobiography, as indicated by similarities in their titles—'Memories of Hightown and Beyond', 'Memories of Long Ago', 'My Life as I Remember it', 'My Life in and out of Print (A Sketch of an ordinary working man's life)', 'Reminiscences of an Old Draper', 'Reminiscences of an Ordinary Life'—they generally did not refer to other autobiographies in their memoirs.<sup>72</sup>

How might the first writers to respond to Burnett's appeal for memoirs on Radio 4 in 1973 have been influenced by the serialisation of Winifred Foley's *A Child of the Forest* that accompanied it, and the conversation between the historian and the author?<sup>73</sup> Just as Writing Lives students have learned to contextualise and interpret their author's experience by reading about other life-writing studied by their peers, we hope that interactive forms of publishing and reading will give new autobiographers the opportunity to draw connections and comparisons with other lives as well as affirmation of their own individuality.

'I feel this is just a very gossipy letter I am writing to a friend', wrote Mary Triggles to Burnett in 1977. Her apologetic aside is, perhaps, as much a gesture of friendship as a mark of deference to the important professor, for she clearly hoped to deepen their acquaintance and several times had invited him to visit: '(If I keep on I feel we might be related in some way) hope

the book will be a great success & that I shall still be around when it is published.’ ‘PS’, she added, ‘please forgive an old woman just having a little talk with you’.<sup>74</sup>

John Burnett did not include extracts from Mary’s autobiographical writings in his anthologies. There is one last letter from her in the archive, written in her daughter’s hand in 1981 when Mary was ninety-three:

Dear Professor Burnett.

Please accept this rug. It gives me the chance to say thankyou for the opportunity to use my memory. I’d often wished I could tell the story of my Grandfather and my father’s wonderful conversion. Also to pay tribute to my mother for all she did to find the rest of Grand-father’s family.

I hope you will be able to find a place for the rug.

Yours sincerely.

M. Laura. Triggle (Mrs).

She did, however, issue a warning to the professor: “P.S. If you have a dog, keep an eye on the rug. Dogs like to pull pieces of material out of these rugs, our dog does anyway!”<sup>75</sup>

How apt that Mary Triggle sent the historian a rag rug in return for the opportunity to tell her family story—the homely and often home-made rug, woven from scraps of discarded cloth—that, since the time of Mary’s birth, had brightened so many working-class interiors.<sup>76</sup> Sometimes they were carefully crafted to form regular patterns or a pleasing picture, just as some authors pulled the strands of different narrative threads to fit their own lives into a wider story and social framework. Other rugs were a glorious riot of colour and pattern, sampled apparently at random, and yet the strands contrasting and highlighting each other, just as the threads of memory jostled together in Mary’s reminiscences. The rag rug is an evocative metaphor for the

Burnett Collection, too, and its haphazard and serendipitous contents—the ‘mad fragmentations’ that for Steedman characterises all archives.<sup>77</sup> Yet the Burnett Archive exists because its authors wanted to preserve their memories, and their writing was deposited because others cared, thought them important, and in need of protection. Mary was right to warn the historian to guard against loose threads and dogs that might pull a rag rug apart.

#### Acknowledgements

We are very grateful to Katie Flanagan, Special Collections Librarian at Brunel University; she has provided invaluable assistance both to our research and to making the Burnett Archive of Working Class Autobiographies accessible to the Writing Lives students.

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<sup>1</sup> This and the preceding four quotations are all from Mary Laura Triggles to John Burnett, Shrewsbury, 11 June 1974, in ‘Untitled’, 1:719, Brunel University Library, 26.

<sup>2</sup> Triggles to Burnett, Shrewsbury, 3 July 1974, in ‘Untitled’, 6.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>4</sup> Owen, ‘Autobiographical Letter’, 2:576, Brunel University Library, 1.

<sup>5</sup> Woolf’s misgivings about writing this form of preface and the concern that her contribution ‘would give pain and be misunderstood’ are expressed in her 1930 letter to the editor of the collection, Margaret Llewelyn Davies. Woolf to Llewelyn Davies, Lewes, 14 Sept 1930, *The Letters*

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of *Virginia Woolf: A Reflection of the Other Person, 1929-1931, Volume 4*, ed Nigel Nicholson (London: Hogarth Press, 1978), 212-3.

<sup>6</sup> Woolf, 'Introductory Letter to Margaret Llewelyn Davies', in *Life As We Have Known It By Co-Operative Working Women*, ed Margaret Llewelyn Davies (London: Virago, 1977), xxxi.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, xxxv.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, xxxi.

<sup>9</sup> Woolf to Llewelyn Davies, London, 1 February 1931, in *Letters of Virginia Woolf*, 286.

<sup>10</sup> Woolf, quoted in Linda Anderson, *Autobiography* (London: Routledge, 2001), 95.

<sup>11</sup> Anderson, *Autobiography*, 94.

<sup>12</sup> For a discussion of the symbolic cachet of 'fragmentation' for modernist literary studies, see Suzanne Juhasz, "'Some Deep Old Desk or Capacious Hold-All": Form and Women's Autobiography', *College English* 39, no. 6 (1978): 666.

<sup>13</sup> Swindells, *Victorian Writing and Working Women: The Other Side of Silence* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1985), 191. Elsewhere in the study, Swindells provides an important analysis of the way in which literary readings can augment understandings of working-class writing as well as historical interpretations of these sources.

<sup>14</sup> Burnett, *Useful Toil: Autobiographies of Working People from the 1820s to the 1920s* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1994), 11.

<sup>15</sup> David Vincent, *Bread, Knowledge and Freedom: A Study of Nineteenth-Century Working-Class Autobiography* (London: Methuen, 1981); Nan Hackett, 'A Different Form of "Self": Narrative Style in British Nineteenth-Century Working-class Autobiography', *Biography* 12, no. 3 (1989): 208-26; Regenia Gagnier, *Subjectivities: A History of Self-Representation in Britain, 1832-1920* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991).

<sup>16</sup> Farndon, 'Untitled', 2:269, Brunel University Library, 1.

<sup>17</sup> Ley, 'Untitled', 1:872, Brunel University Library.

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<sup>18</sup> Hutchinson, 'The Bells of St Mary's', 2:429, Brunel University Library; and Luck, 'A Little of My Life', Brunel University Library.

<sup>19</sup> Till, foreword to 'The Early Years of a Victorian Grandmother', 2:763, Brunel University Library; and Baker, 'Untitled', 2:865, *ibid.*, 7. It is worth noting in this regard that there exists a long tradition of published working-class writers who framed their autobiographical accounts with 'modest' summations of their achievement—either in the titles of the works or in an introductory preface.

<sup>20</sup> Baker, 'Untitled', 7.

<sup>21</sup> Frisby, 'Memories', 1:250, Brunel University Library, vol. 1, 1.

<sup>22</sup> Woolf, 'A Sketch of the Past', in *Moments of Being: A Collection of Autobiographical Writing*, ed Jeanne Schulkind (San Diego: Harcourt, 1985), 70.

<sup>23</sup> Burnett, Vincent and Mayall (eds), *Autobiography of the Working Class*, 1:141.

<sup>24</sup> Chase, 'The Memoirs of Alice Maud Chase', 1:141, Brunel University Library, 11.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 11-12.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>27</sup> Tobias, 'Childhood Memories', 2:766, Brunel University Library, 1-2.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>29</sup> Chase, 'The Memoirs', 48.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 48-50.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>33</sup> There are gendered aspects to be taken into account here too, and the apparently fragmentary style of women's autobiographical writing has been remarked on by a number of critics. Juhasz, for example, notes the tendency for women writers to produce 'sequences of short episodes, arranged like snapshots in an album, without connecting links of analysis or thematic causality.'

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Such a form grants primary to the visions of memory and to memory's mysterious process of selection'. Juhasz, "Some Deep Old Desk", 667.

<sup>34</sup> Lynn Abrams uses the term 'epiphanic moments' in the context of oral history to refer to 'moments of acute self-recognition which occur *both* in the narrator's life experience (as a significant event remembered, recounted or used to explain something) *and* in the moment of the oral history interview'. Abrams, 'Liberating the Female Self: Epiphanies, Conflict and Coherence in the Life Stories of Post-War British Women,' *Social History* 39, no. 1 (2014): 21.

<sup>35</sup> Sinor, *The Extraordinary Work of Ordinary Writing: Annie Ray's Diary* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2002), 187.

<sup>36</sup> Wilson, 'Way of Life and Memories of Ilfracombe and Near-By District', 2:954, Brunel University Library, 1.

<sup>37</sup> James, 'A Soul Remembering by A. Gordon James. An Intimate Autobiography', 1:376, Brunel University Library, 1-2.

<sup>38</sup> Hutchinson, 'The Bells', 41.

<sup>39</sup> George Morris and David Cowan, 'Stories about Individual Lives—or Intimate Histories', *Modern British Studies*, Birmingham, 2018, <https://mbsbham.wordpress.com/2018/07/26/stories-about-individual-lives-or-intimate-histories/>.

<sup>40</sup> Trigg to Burnett, Shrewsbury, 24 February 1977, in 'Untitled', 20.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>42</sup> Baker, 'Mary Laura Trigg', <http://www.writinglives.org/category/about/marytrigg/>.

<sup>43</sup> Burnett, Vincent, and Mayall, *Autobiography of the Working Class*, 1:719.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 1: xxxi.

<sup>45</sup> Vincent, *Bread, Knowledge and Freedom: A Study of Nineteenth-Century Working-Class Autobiography* (London: Methuen, 1981), 10.

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<sup>46</sup> Emma Griffin, *Liberty's Dawn: A People's History of the Industrial Revolution* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013).

<sup>47</sup> Burnett, Vincent, and Mayall, *Autobiography of the Working Class*, 1: xviii.

<sup>48</sup> Martin, 'The Ups and Downs of Life', Brunel University Library, 1:499; Burnett, Vincent, and Mayall, *Autobiography of the Working Class*, 1:499.

<sup>49</sup> For working-class schooling and literacy rates in this period, see John Burnett, ed. *Destiny Obscure: Autobiographies of Childhood, Education, and Family from the 1820s to the 1920s*. London: Allen Lane, 1982 and David Vincent, *Literacy and Popular Culture: England 1750-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

<sup>50</sup> Harris to Burnett, Ronkswood, 18 June 1978, 'Autobiographical Letters, 1978-84', 2:363, Brunel University Library, 2.

<sup>51</sup> Garrett, 'Untitled', 2:305, Brunel University Library, 12.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>53</sup> Tracey Hughes, 'Harold Heslop (1893-1983)', [www.writinglives.org/haroldheslop](http://www.writinglives.org/haroldheslop); and Andy Croft and Graeme Rigby, *Out of the Old Earth* (Newcastle Upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1994).

<sup>54</sup> Brown, 'Untitled', 1:093, Brunel University Library.

<sup>55</sup> Hilton-Foord, 'Grannie's Girl' and "The Survivor: The Memoirs Of A Little Dover Girl", 2:398 and 2:397, Brunel University Library.

<sup>56</sup> Childerhouse, 'Mrs RM Downer (b. 1884): Researching Writing Lives', <http://www.writinglives.org/researchinglives/mrs-rm-downer-b-1884-researching-writing-lives>.

<sup>57</sup> Triggles to Burnett, Shrewsbury, 11 June 1974, in 'Untitled', 1.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 4, 2.

<sup>60</sup> Triggles to Burnett, Shrewsbury, 3 July 1974, in 'Untitled', 14.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.



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<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 9, 11,

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>64</sup> Triggles to Burnett, Shrewsbury, 23 July 1974, in 'Untitled', 28.

<sup>65</sup> Steedman, *The Tidy House: Little Girls Writing*, London: Virago, 1982, 117-9; and *Landscape for a Good Woman*, London, Virago, 1986, 125-39.

<sup>66</sup> Triggles to Burnett, Shrewsbury, 28 June 1974/3 July 1974, in 'Untitled', 6.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>68</sup> See, for example, Pat Thane, *Old Age in English History: Past Experiences, Present Issues* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

<sup>69</sup> This and the preceding four quotations are all from Triggles to Burnett, Shrewsbury, 19 February 1977, in 'Untitled', 16-17.

<sup>70</sup> Triggles to Burnett, Shrewsbury, 24 February 1977, in 'Untitled', 19.

<sup>71</sup> Burnett, Vincent, and Mayall, *Autobiography of the Working Class*, xiv.

<sup>72</sup> Thomas Waddicor, 'Memories of Hightown and Beyond', Brunel University Library, 2:787; Mrs. W.E. Palmer, 'Memories of Long Ago', *ibid.*, 2:582; Lottie Barker, 'My Life as I Remember It', *ibid.*, 2:037; Paul Evett, 'My Life In and Out of Print. (A sketch of an ordinary working-man's life)', *ibid.*, 1:233; William H. Albeti, *Reminiscences of an Old Draper* (London: Sampson Low, Marston, Searle and Rivington, 1876), 1:001; and William Webb, 'Reminiscences of an Ordinary Life', *ibid.*, 1:739.

<sup>73</sup> Partial transcript, 'Woman's Hour', 22 March 1973, Part 1, BBC Written Archives Centre.

<sup>74</sup> Triggles to Burnett, Shrewsbury, 24 February 1977, in 'Untitled', 21-22.

<sup>75</sup> Triggles to Burnett, Shrewsbury, 30 November 1981, in 'Untitled', 32-33.

<sup>76</sup> Steedman, *Dust* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001), 112-41.

<sup>77</sup> Steedman, *Dust*, 68.

Figure 1. Mary Triggles first letter to John Burnett, 11 June 1976. 'Untitled', 1:719, Brunel University Library.

22 11, 1976

Flat 15 Vineyard Cottages  
 Ack 67 P. (A) Longmar  
 Shrewsbury

Dear Sir

After hearing your talk on Saturday  
 June 9<sup>th</sup> on 4 1/2 hours at 3 o'clock & asking  
 for history of the early life of the working  
 class. I wondered if my story would  
 be the sort of material you were  
 wanting? As this is really a family  
 story & that I am the only one left to  
 tell it & (I shall be 86 years <sup>old</sup> in October.)

The story starts long before I was born  
 it starts about my Grandfather.

I have now told my story so if it is  
 of no use, I feel better for telling it as  
 we as children loved both Grandma &  
 Grandfather & to us he was a fine old  
 old gentleman tall & always wore a 3 band  
 you called a Dilly Boots Hat.

Yours sincerely Mrs M L Triggles

P T O

excuse mistakes & spelling, I have never tried  
 to do any thing like this before, but I  
 feel I have just been talking to someone  
 & as I live alone even this has been  
 like having company, almost as if the  
 family were here with me.

M L T